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ABSTRACT

Universities can help elementary and secondary schools undertake school improvement programs under certain conditions. First, it should be recognized that programs are most effective when individual schools rather than whole systems are the objects of the improvement efforts. Second, it should be understood that university-sponsored school assistance agencies have a greater responsibility to advocate proven improvement programs than do individual faculty members. The Center for School Improvement at Michigan State University requires proof that five standards have been met before programs are allowed to be advocated to practitioners. The programs must be proven to be knowledge based, educative in nature, programmatic in form, focused on the problem, and client oriented and collaborative. Even when universities cannot undertake the research, development, and evaluation processes necessary to prove program effectiveness, the university can still play a role in school improvement, particularly through encouragement of individual faculty efforts. Research dissemination, research synthesis, and research application efforts can be urged, and faculty members can serve as group facilitators, trained observers, and program evaluators. (Author/PGD)

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THE UNIVERSITY ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

by

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I was especially pleased to be asked to participate in this symposium and discuss the University's role in school improvement. For the last six years or so I have been responsible for the dissemination programs of the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University. More recently, I accepted the responsibility of planning the MSU Center for School Improvement. As you might imagine these two tasks have caused me to reflect on the role of the University in School Improvement efforts on several occasions.

Perhaps the most serious reflection on this issue occurred when we developed a collaborative school improvement proposal with the Detroit Public Schools, the Wayne County Intermediate School District and the Michigan Department of Education. The questions of what ought to be and what can be the role of the University were necessarily brought into sharp focus. The proposal was funded by the NIE and we are now beginning the second year scope of work on the project titled, "Research Dissemination Through Collaborative Planning for School Improvement." The lessons we have learned pursuiant to the development and implementation of this project have served to inform this paper.

While the title of my paper specifically mentions the University, I believe my remarks can be generalized to most institutions of higher education, not simply the University. Being at Michigan State University many require a qualification on this belief. MSU is fortunate to have the IRT - the National Center for Research on Teaching located on its campus. As a result of this major program of research our University and College may have a special place in the world of practice because of the research alone.

My comments will center on the following two questions.

1) Does the University have a role in K-12 school improvement?

and if "yes"

2) What conditions should surround the University's interaction with K-12 schools as they seek to improve schools?

In order to address these questions we need to be clear about the terms being used.

First, we need to define what we mean by school improvement.

1. School Improvement

For purposes of this discussion I wish to focus literally on the whole of the single school as the object of the improvement effort. I do not want to suggest that the University's role in improvement efforts would be radically different for large system improvement programs (e.g., two or more schools) or different when the object of improvement involves something less than the whole school (e.g., language arts staff).

I believe that centering the discussion on the single school has several features that serve to clarify our expectations regarding the role of the University. For example current research in staff development, organizational development and planned change all seem to point the efficacy of the single school as the strategic unit for improvement. While I believe that it's logical to assume that effective improvement designs could facilitate both school system and sub-system improvement; the nature of the role would probably be somewhat different.

My reason for connecting the single school - whole school - issue with the University's role is as follows. The University's potential contribution to school improvement is very circumscribed. Universities don't have money to offer, rather they offer "knowledge." If the University is going to establish and maintain a viable school improvement role one standard that ought to be met is that the University must "practice" what

the knowledge base it purports to represent "preaches." Put the question this way. If research says that the strategic unit for improvement is the single school why would the University agree to interact for purposes of school improvement with anything other than a single school or at least one school at a time?

From the perspective of the University the definition of "improvement" is easy. Improvement has to mean helping a school do better that which it has decided it wishes to do better. This rather unsettling definition of improvement may not be satisfying to many. Nevertheless, the definition reflects the only viable position that can be taken by the University. The University does not have a legal basis for advocating any definition of improvement that does not recognize the school's authority for stating its goals or defining its own needs. Such authority is vested in state and local educational institutions and structures. In addition to the absence of a legal basis, the Universities have historically attempted to take an objective and neutral position on such matters as needed areas for school improvement.

I recall discussing school improvement with a group of building principals and as long as I reacted to their lead as to areas in need of improvement everything proceeded smoothly. However, I once made the mistake of suggesting that building principals need to reevaluate their own leadership style in order for schools to improve. One of the principals accused me of having crossed the line and I was no longer preaching but I had taken to "meddling".

Summing up, when we are speaking about the University's role in school improvement we are speaking about helping the people that make up the single school to do better what it is that they have decided

needs improvement.

The next area that needs to be brought into focus is the term "University". Here I make a distinction between institutional sponsorship and individual faculty or staff sponsorship.

It is important to realize that while the University as such has tended to be more or less objective and neutral on matters, such as school improvement, the individuals who work at the University are not so constrained. Recognizing the distinction between the University and the men and women who work there is important because they need to be thought about differently. Individuals employed at the University enjoy a great deal of freedom to speak out on issues and concerns. They are free to advocate for this or that idea. In this sense, the faculty member is free to advocate nearly anything and everything and the responsibility rests with the "listener" to decide the merits of the message. In the context of school improvement, school people need to recognize that individuals from the University may well be articulate advocates of their own ideas and values, but the efficacy of those positions is left largely to the school people to judge. This situation may be described as the 1982 version of the concept of "caveat emptor" in the knowledge brokering business. Quiet as it's kept, there is evidence on the record of at least one instance where the University based salesman and advocate promoted an idea that was not sound. I will resist the temptation of listing any number of ideas that seemed sensible on their face but just don't work in practice.

On the other hand, when the University sponsors programs designed to improve schools I firmly believe a different set of standards ought to obtain. When the sponsorship of an institution is awarded a set of

ideas or programs, the general public has a right to expect that those ideas or that program has been rigorously examined and critiqued by the peer review process. It seems reasonable to presume that the peer review process should constitute a basic step in this awarding of institutional sponsorship. I would recommend that public schools insist on evidence that the peer review process has worked its course whenever ideas carry institutional sponsorship.

Would the peer review process eliminate the possibility that the ideas or programs without merit would never be disseminated? Clearly not. However, such a standard would go along way in that direction because it would force the advocates to assemble the evidence that would be needed to establish the efficacy of the idea or program. This added level of rigor in and of itself would serve to reduce the dissemination of "half-tested", "half-truths".

I am well aware of the fact the Universities and other institutions of higher education have been generally reluctant to engage in technical assistance services of the type generally associated with school improvement. Declining University enrollments and shrinking research dollars are stimulating many to consider service as the "only game in town". While I personally would welcome additions to the service force of the University, they must be the right kind of people interested in service for the right reasons. The last thing the public schools need is yet another diversion no matter how well meaning the individual may be.

The Center for School Improvement (CSI) at Michigan State University represents an attempt to apply these ideas in a specific design for a program aimed at helping schools in their school improvement efforts.

These issues are made somewhat easier to implement at Michigan State because of its long and proud land grant traditions that recognizes and values public service.

As the CSI becomes operational, the faculty that wish to have their programs reviewed and subsequently awarded institutional sponsorship must be prepared to provide evidence and testimony that five standards have been met. The standards are:

1. Knowlege Based:

   Sponsored programs must be grounded in and derive from a credible research and scholarly base. The advocate must be prepared to establish the evidence that the research and scholarship is related to school improvement.

   The research and scholarship maybe directly associated with the faculty advocate identified with the program or be based on a synthesis of existing research of other scholars, or a combination of both.

2. Educative in Nature:

   CSI sponsored school improvement programs must take the form of education or training broadly defined. Acceptable education and training formats may include but not be limited to seminars, colloquia, interactive consultations or other forms of technical assistance.

3. Programmatic in Form:

   CSI sponsored programs must contain descriptions of the goals towards which the program is directed and the delivery system that will be deployed to reach those goals. In most cases CSI sponsored programs will be longer term.

4. Problem Focused:

   CSI sponosred programs must contain a discussion of the problems, issues, or concerns to which the program seeks to respond.

5. Client Oriented and Collaborative:

   CSI sponsored programs will include a description of the primary and secondary client groups for whom the program is intended. Such designations may be explicit or general. Programs are expected to present evidence that members of the client groups have collaborated in the development of the program.

The previous discussion of the University's role in school improvement as presented in the description of the CSI has a clear product delivery focus. Clearly Universities should be encouraged to undertake the research, development and evaluation studies suggested as prerequest to the process of awarding institutional sponsorship. This idea of the University's role is clearly lofty and perhaps beyond the reach of many post-secondary institutions. Nonetheless, those institutions of higher education that are willing and able to pursue this standard of program planning and evaluation should receive our continued encouragement and support.

Short of this standard are there other roles that the University can be expected to play in the school improvement process? Our experience to date with the Detroit School Improvement Project suggest that there are several roles that the University can play in the collaborative approach to school improvement. The following section suggests and briefly comments on several valued roles we have played in the school improvement planning process.

1. Research Dissemination:

The faculty from the University have made a valued contribution to the building level planning process by identifying and making available current research on issues or practices receiving attention. In this case the University's role is that of linking agent. The local improvement team members are linked with research that has relevance to the team. It is important to point out that little if any editorial activity accompanies this role.

The University people are not necessarily expected to even pass judgment on the quality of efficacy of the research.

2. Research Synthesis:

University people may be skilled at the role of research synthesis. In this role the person would examine several studies on or around a given topic and seek to look across the studies for those generalizations that seem to hold-up. In this situation, the University persons role is much more judgmental for they must decide what research studies to consider, what areas of agreement are present and what meanings should be attached.

3. Research Into Practice:

Some University staff may be well qualified for the extremely difficult role of drawing implications from the research. Not only must the individual possess all the skills needed to do synthesis work but he/she must have the capacity for inferring what meanings practitioners can and should attach to the research as it relates to their practice.

Such an individual must be able to stand in two worlds and be able to be equally credible and confident in both. The individual must be at home with research, its terms, methods and style. The individual must be similarly at home with practice, its terms, limitations and realities - a rare individual indeed.

4. Group Facilitator:

When school improvement efforts involve the whole of a school's staff some organized and structured group process procedures may be required in order to efficiently and effectively manage the enterprise. An example might be conducting a needs assessment using a nominal group process. Individuals from outside the immediate staff, such as University people, may be well qualified and appropriate for this task. First, their guidance will insure that the process provides an opportunity for everyone to

participate. Second, because the individual would be an "outsider" he/she can control the group so that informal leaders do not dominate the discussion.

5. Trained Observer:

The last ten years of research on effective schools, effective teaching, effective classroom management have been productive in large part because that research depended heavily on systematic observation. School improvement programs, in my judgment, will require similar systematic observation accompanied by credible feedback-corrective or otherwise. Because the University person is not a member of that local school social system but is nevertheless seen as credible, he/she may be able to provide the systematic observation dimension needed. The observation and feedback could be at the individual level (e.g., clinical supervision) or it could be at the school-wide level where a report is made to the whole staff.

In the role as trained observer, being from outside the school social system is a advantage.

6. Program Evaluator:

A logical extension of the trained observer role is that of program evaluator. University people because of the fact that they are external, may be able to help the school improvement process by participating in or even actually conducting a school level evaluation. The goal of such evaluations would be to provide systematic evidence on the progress or impact of a building level improvement initiative.

I'm sure we could go on and describe other roles that could be productively played by the individuals from the University but perhaps enough has been said to make the point.

Summary

The paper began with two questions. The first question, "Does the

University have a role in K-12 school improvement? The answer to this question is affirmative but conditional.

The role of the University per se is very circumscribed but nevertheless useful. The role of individuals from the University who represent their own interests is much less contrained but may be much more problematic.

In the future I strongly believe the that University should strengthen and expand its capacity and commitment to school improvement. I truly feel we have an obligation to improve practice if we have the knowledge base needed to foster such improvements. Because of recent advances in research on effective teaching and effective schools we have some knowledge that can be used to improve schools.